



# VALERIE SOBEL

## ANGEL *L* MERCY

by Alisa Weinstein

**A** strong dedication and hard work for families with terminally ill children at a time when tragedy is imminent, makes Valerie Sobel nothing short of an angel. Sobel's non-profit organization, Andre Sobel River of Life Foundation, was born out of her own personal tragedy when her teenage son, Andre, was diagnosed with a malignant inoperable brain tumor. One short year later Andre died, leaving a devastating loss that was too much to bear for his father who shortly after took his own life; leaving Sobel a single parent to their daughter. *"When there is no time, you react from a place of instinct and the resilience that is available to you at that moment. This resilience is inborn and not something you have earned. It exists differently for each of us and has little to do with either intellect or courage."*

Sobel's resilience was tested at a very early age. Sobel and her family escaped their native Hungary in 1956 during the revolt against the Soviet Union. She recalls carrying her brother eight miles across the marshy border to her freedom in Austria, only to be held in a refugee camp for several months. Finally her family settled in Toronto, Canada and even today she remains humble in recounting her story of survival. *"Strength is a misnomer for the way one deals with the inevitable tribulations that come to each life."*

Growing up in Canada, Sobel gravitated towards the arts; her acting ability was recognized when she was flown to Los Angeles for a screen test and won a role in "Mr. Hobbs Takes a Vacation" with Jimmy Stewart. Her life was in the midst of great change; she permanently moved to Los Angeles where she met and married her husband, Erwin, and soon after gave birth to her son, Andre and then daughter, Simone. She made the decision to leave the entertainment business in order to focus on her

family. Being an artist at heart, she developed a successful career in interior design with several projects appearing in the pages of *Architectural Digest* as well as several books and magazines.

Her life was fulfilling with a wonderful family and a career that she enjoyed but her world was turned upside down when her son was diagnosed at the age of 18. *"During that time I was fortunate to have had everything at my fingertips; my parents across the street, our housekeeper of 15 years, a cook, a driver, and no financial restrictions for my son's medical needs."*

One year later, in 1995, Andre died and his loss was a deafening blow to all who knew him. *"My grief could not be counseled away. Sharing great joy or great pain is an illusion."* The grief of losing a child is unimaginable but Sobel soon lost much more. Her Mother passed away within that year and adding the crowning blow, her husband, Erwin, took his own life a year later; further compounding the tragedy. *"I found that with a journey deeper than the ocean, it was not possible to avail myself of emotional or psychological support... I could have had at any time dozens of people embracing me, yet the drama that takes place within rages in solitude."*

But during this time of great pain and suffering, Sobel felt moved to help others going through what her family had endured, forming the *Andre Sobel River of Life Foundation*. *"You don't really recover; you learn to live with it, because of it and in spite of it. My daughter's feelings are completely different from mine. She was a daughter and a sister while I was a mother, wife and a daughter. To this day, there has been no honest conversation between us, as her way of dealing with the topic is to bolt if it comes up. There is no right or wrong way."*

Sobel's vision for the foundation was simple; helping the helpless in any way possible. *"Our foundation*

*is called the River of Life. Our river is wide, deep, constant and unrestricted. If a family needs their rent paid, or the healthy children need school uniforms or an airline ticket for a family member who can come and help, it is these varied requests that guide our provisions.”*

In 2000, the River of Life Foundation helped its very first recipient; a young girl, appropriately named Charity, who was orphaned and stricken with cancer. *“She had leukemia and no parents. An alcoholic grandmother took care of her who changed overnight and became an enormously competent caregiver for her granddaughter. This case and every other since--to date we have been involved with more than 10,000 family members--has taught us much about the human ability to rise to the occasion, selflessness and nobility, and the differences of each circumstance.”*

Sobel has been a tireless advocate for the children and the families affected by a terminal illness. She works directly with social workers who contact Sobel and the foundation so help can arrive within 24 hours. *“We are proud of the fact that we do not humiliate people by making them jump through hoops, and fill out endless paperwork. Our criterion has always been and remains: Do you have a catastrophically ill child? Are you out of funds? What do you need in order to be able to remain with your child? The Andre Sobel River of Life Foundation is about the child’s need at such a time for their parent. The flip side of that is that the parent’s needs and wants are identical; they wish to be nowhere else but with their child who needs them.”*

The foundation is a support system that literally acts as caretaker and caregiver to the family as their needs both monetarily and emotionally are stretched. This is truly a labor of love and a commitment that Sobel has made in her son Andre’s name. *“My dream is to create awareness about a silent and unseen population of single parents with very sick children who have a very difficult time coping. We now know that 78 percent of families with a terminally-ill child separate or divorce, experiencing a multiple fracture.”*

Her compassion, knowledge and dedication are unwavering just like her vision for the foundation. Sobel is determined to get the word out and in the process help others understand how they can help.

*“By the very nature of a sudden onset of catastrophic illness, there is no way to prepare, and these families very quickly experience a meltdown. We welcome volunteers in almost any branch of interest, as we can’t afford public relations, financial management, or event coordination. We need professionals from those areas to help us. The biggest help, of course, is funds. We don’t give advice – we give money in order to soften the journey for a family that is beside themselves financially, emotionally and physically.”*

Yes, Valerie Sobel is a daughter, sister, wife, mother, activist and philanthropist; she can now add *“Guardian Angel”* to the list. ❧

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